

Chicago's Assyrian Americans

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Most of Chicago's Assyrian Americans started to migrate from their countries of origin in the 1970s. Assyrians are descendants of the ancient Assyrian people who built the mighty empires of Assyria and Babylonia. They are indigenous to Mesopotamia and have a history of over 6700 years. Assyrians have played a major role in the civilization of mankind. After the fall of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires around the sixth and seventh centuries B.C., Assyrians were forced to become a small nation living at the mercy of overlords in the Middle East. Assyrians were among the first people to embrace Christianity. Assyrians were not allowed to learn Assyrian in Iraq. They were forced to learn Arabic.

Life for Assyrians was not always simple. In recent times, some Assyrians left their countries because they wanted to have more opportunities. Some left because they wanted to make something of themselves and some did not approve of political conditions in their countries. Many left because there was a war between Iraq and Iran. If men were turning eighteen they were required to enroll in the army. Iraq and Iran were fighting over land on the borders that both countries claimed. Saddam Hussein seized control of the government and forced Assyrian men into the military and kept them in the war against their own will for many years. This war lasted from 1980 to 1990, and over one million people died on both sides. Most Assyrians wanted better lives. In their countries there were not as many opportunities and money as there are here.

Assyrians immigrated to Chicago by passing through other American cities and states to settle here. Other Assyrians had to become diplomatic refugees to gain visas. Once the Assyrians had come here they had to find a way to support themselves.

When Assyrians first came to Chicago they had to learn how to survive in a different culture and environment. The Assyrians had to find careers. Some of the most common types of Assyrian-American businesses in Chicago include privately owned video rental stores, restaurants, gas stations, auto repair shops, convenience stores, auto dealerships, and beauty salons. Other common types of businesses are computer stores, alteration shops, air conditioning and heating, photography, insurance, real estate, and construction contractors. Assyrians built their own churches, restaurants, newspapers, a library, and more. One of the churches is located on Pulaski. One of the restaurants is called "Garden of Eden" located on Devon and Bell and an important newspaper is called the *Assyrian Times*. There is only one library of Assyrian literature in Chicago. It is located on Clark Street. Assyrians also have their own organizations such as The Assyrian Aid Society of America.

Assyrians have been fairly successful. For example, Assyrian Americans had fought in World War I and II. Organizations have built monuments to honor the Assyrians who fought and died for our country. They have tried to make Chicago a better place. Many have done amazing things.

Now that Assyrians have been here for a long time, life has become a little easier. Assyrians have had careers, raised families, formed their own communities and more. Today Assyrians live largely on the north side of the city. The greatest number are around West Rogers Park. Approximately 80,000 Assyrians live in Chicago and approximately sixty-four percent of Assyrians are foreign born. Chicago is home to the largest Assyrian population in the United States, second in the world only to Iraq.

[From Assyrian Aid Society, www.assyrianaid.org (Sept. 2, 2002); Assyrian American Veterans, www.edessa.com/vets/hosanna.htm (Sept. 2, 2002); Assyrians of Chicago, www.aina.org (Sept. 2, 2002); Brief History of Assyrians, www.aina.org (Sept. 2, 2002); student historian's interview with Khosaba Baniamin, Sept. 9, 2002; Richard Lindberg, *Ethnic Groups of Chicago*; *Metro Chicago*, Apr. 5, 1998; student historian's interview with Ashour Mosa, Sept. 9, 2002.]